

DESCRIPTION OF THE PARK

Isle Royale National Park, in the northwestern section of Lake Superior, is a remote island archipelago with a northeast/southwest orientation (see Region and Vicinity maps). The archipelago consists of one large island about 45 miles long and 9 miles wide that is surrounded by about 400 small islands. It includes many inland lakes and streams. The park is about 60 miles from Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, 22 miles from Grand Portage, Minnesota, and 35 miles from Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. The year-around headquarters for the park is in Houghton, Michigan.

The park was authorized by act of Congress on March 3, 1931. The intent of Congress was further defined by wilderness legislation in October 1976 that designated 98% of the park's land area as federal wilderness. Later additions brought the total to 99% (see Wilderness Status map). The park extends 4.5 miles out into Lake Superior from the outer islands or to the international boundary. In 1980 the park was designated as a U. S. Biosphere Reserve under the United Nations' Man and the Biosphere Programme.

Isle Royale is primarily a northwoods wilderness and maritime park. There is one overnight lodge at the east end of the main island. Visitors come to the island to hike, backpack, motorboat, canoe, kayak, sail, scuba dive, or fish.

The primary means of access to the park are via ferry and seaplane from Houghton, Michigan, and via ferry from Copper Harbor, Michigan and Grand Portage, Minnesota. About 30% of visitors travel to the park in private boats. The park is open from mid-April through the end of October; it is closed the rest of the year due to extreme winter weather conditions and for protection of wildlife and for the safety and protection of visitors.

Isle Royale is comprised of a series of parallel ridges and valleys oriented along the same axis. Many of the park's 165 miles of hiking trails follow ridge lines. Swamps and other wetlands are common throughout the park.

Isle Royale is densely forested. The waters of Lake Superior remain cool year-round, creating cool, moist conditions near the shoreline where northern boreal spruce-fir forests are found. The warmer and drier interior of the island is covered, especially at the southwestern end of the island, in sugar maple, yellow birch, and other northern hardwoods.

Many mammals common to the continental mainland are not found on Isle Royale because of the island's isolation in Lake Superior. The island's best known species are the timber wolf and moose, but at least twelve others, including beaver, red fox, and snowshoe hare, can also be found. Birds on Isle Royale are similar to those on the mainland. Relatively little is known about the island's reptile and amphibian populations. The fish of Isle Royale are one of the park's most significant natural resources.

Human activity on Isle Royale can be traced back at least 4,500 years, when Native American groups first began using the island's copper and other natural resources. Fur trapping, the island's first historic commercial activity, was followed by copper mining, commercial fishing, logging, and vacationing. Evidence of most of these activities remains on the island today.

PARK PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Park purpose statements are based on park legislation and legislative history, other special designations, and NPS policies. The statements reaffirm the reasons for which Isle Royale was set aside as part of the national park system. Purpose statements provide the foundation for park management and use.

Draft purpose statements were reviewed by the park staff and the public. The following statements reflect changes in response to comments.

- preserve and protect the park's wilderness character for use and enjoyment by present and future generations
- preserve and protect the park's cultural and natural resources and ecological processes
- provide opportunities for recreational uses and experiences that are compatible with the preservation of the park's wilderness character and park resources
- provide park-related educational and interpretive opportunities for the public
- provide opportunities for scientific study of ecosystem components and processes, including human influences and use, and share the findings with the public

Park significance statements capture the essence of the park's importance to the nation's natural and cultural heritage. Significance statements do not inventory park resources; rather, they describe the park's distinctiveness and help to place the park in its regional, national, and international contexts. Understanding park significance helps managers make decisions that preserve the resources and values necessary to accomplish the park's purposes.

The following significance statements were developed for Isle Royale National Park and were refined based on park staff and public comments.

- This maritime park, a U. S. biosphere reserve, encompasses a remote and primitive wilderness archipelago isolated by the size and power of Lake Superior.

- Isle Royale is world renowned for its long-term wolf/moose predator/prey study. The park offers outstanding possibilities for research in a remote, relatively simple ecosystem where overt human influences are limited.
- Park waters contain the most productive native fishery and genetically diverse lake trout populations in Lake Superior.

PARK EMPHASIS STATEMENTS

Park emphasis statements flow out of the park significance statements and incorporate key resources and stories that characterize Isle Royale National Park. These statements are emphasized in the park's education and interpretation programs. They also serve as broad guiding principles for other park programs and for priority setting. More specific statements for interpretation, resource management, and park operations may be developed from the park emphasis statements.

The park staff developed the following set of park emphasis statements that incorporate ideas expressed by the public.

- Self-sufficiency is a way of life on Isle Royale. Self-sufficiency is as important today for park backpackers, canoeists, and boaters as it was for those who first used and settled the island — Native Americans, European miners, lighthouse keepers, commercial fishermen, and island summer residents.
- Wilderness has many meanings to many people. For Isle Royale National Park, the meaning is defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964, which states a wilderness is an area "... affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable, [and] has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation . . ."

- Isle Royale rose from the depths of Lake Superior some 11,000 years ago and remains ecologically connected to the lake; the forces of the lake still shape and nurture the landscape. The park offers visitors a chance to experience wildness, seclusion, solitude, and recreation. It restores the human spirit. It is a wilderness to be entered on its own terms. It is an adventure.
- Adventure, simple living, and solitude are important parts of an Isle Royale visit. In order to ensure these kinds of experiences, park users must have the skills and habits that foster an ethic of “leave no trace” on the island.
- Isle Royale is a living laboratory where plant and animal life can be studied in a relatively simple ecosystem. The theory of island biogeography is illustrated by both the limited number and variety of species to be found in the park.
- Because of Isle Royale’s generally undisturbed setting, it is an important source of information about the world around us — how the world evolved, how the impacts of civilization have altered natural systems, and what the unmodified environment holds.
- Isle Royale, as a U. S. biosphere reserve, is a valuable asset as a natural baseline that reveals the extent of impacts elsewhere, as a site where scientists and students can study natural processes, as a gene pool helping to maintain the diversity of a northern boreal forest and Lake Superior, and as a sanctuary for certain plants and animals that cannot survive outside of isolated wilderness.
- For thousands of years people have lived an episodic existence on Isle Royale. For centuries the presence of pure copper has drawn people to the island. Similarly, people have been drawn by the island’s spectacular scenery and wilderness opportunities to establish resorts and summer housing on the island. An abundant fishery attracted many. Although the remnants of mining activity, commercial fishing, and the resort era are melding into the landscape, wilderness visitors may still find traces of the park’s rich history.
- Isle Royale has a rich maritime heritage. The island serves as a significant navigational reference point, a refuge from storms, and a treacherous obstacle to mariners. For well over a century its lighthouses have guided ships safely through passages. The park’s waters are the final resting place for an array of shipwrecks that provide an underwater museum that includes many types and stages of maritime technology.
- The National Park Service is striving to sustain the native fishery of Isle Royale National Park — perhaps the most exceptional fishery in the Great Lakes region. For centuries Isle Royale’s waters have drawn fishermen — prehistoric people, immigrant commercial fishermen, and today’s sports fishermen. A relic of the past adaptive fishing lifestyle and technology still remains as a reminder of this significant island culture.